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C O N F I D E N T I A L ABU DHABI 003905

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/14/2010  
TAGS: PREL PTER PGOV TC  
SUBJECT: ONE MAN'S NEGATIVE REACTION TO UAE FRIDAY SERMONS

REF: (A) ABU DHABI 3161 (B) ABU DHABI 3299

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: While the UAEG program of prepared Friday sermons is undoubtedly a strong step towards fighting radicalism and thus terrorism, there is an element of UAE society that is rankled by what it sees as heavy-handed government interference, and which attributes this interference to U.S. influence. This message summarizes a conversation with one outspoken Dubai attorney known for his often controversial views. End summary.

¶2. (C) On August 30, PolOff met with Mohammed Al Roken, an Emirati attorney in Dubai, to discuss the status of his pending application before the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs to create the country's first independent human rights NGO. Al Roken is Chairman of the UAE jurist,s association, and assistant professor of Sharia and Law at UAE University. He is a regular contributor to the Gulf Research Center (a Saudi-sponsored think tank) "Araa" magazine and the Lebanese published "The Daily Star," and has also written for the "American Committee on Jerusalem" and the "UAE Anti-Normalization Committee with Israel." He was one of dozens of UAE academics with an Islamic bent dismissed in the aftermath of 9/11; an ongoing de facto ban dating from 2001 prevents him and nine other prominent intellectuals from either teaching or publishing editorials or opinions in either the English or Arabic UAE press. His writings often criticize both the UAEG and USG.

¶3. (C) In the course of the conversation, Al Roken mentioned that he believed the UAEG elements that were blocking his NGO were the same elements that were responsible for the Friday sermons (note: it is rumored that the NGO is being blocked specifically because of "certain radical elements" on the proposed NGO's board of Governors. End note.) When asked for his thoughts on the sermons, he noted that for the first time in his experience, people were leaving the mosque on

Friday and making jokes about what was said. Asked if the prescribed sermons had affected his attendance, he answered that of course one could not stop going to Friday prayers, but that he and his peers largely ignored the sermons, joking that they can always get them on the internet if they want to know what is going to be said. He chafed at the idea that the UAEG and "outside influences" were trying to dictate what could be discussed in the mosque. When asked if the sermons had changed the dialogue at all, he responded that "the government cannot stop the people from discussing what they want to discuss, only when and where they discuss it."

¶4. (C) Al Roken also noted that the "radical dialogue" that the UAEG had wanted to suppress had simply moved from the mosque to the coffee house Friday evening, and that the overall audience was now larger because the youth were interested in finding out what it was they weren't supposed to hear. He expressed concern that the youth are no longer speaking freely with the Imams because they believe the Imams are now tied to the government. Therefore, he said, there is no opportunity for the Imams to correct any "wrong thinking."

¶5. (C) Comment: Al Roken's remarks demonstrate that while there is a clear upside to the UAEG's top-down dissemination of a moderate message, there may also be a downside. Embassy and ConGen Dubai will continue to follow the UAEG's counter-radicalization efforts, their impact, and any possible backlash. End Comment  
SISON